

# Culture and Subjective Well-Being

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**Abstract** Subjective well-being (SWB) is composed of people's evaluations of their lives, including pleasant affect, infrequent unpleasant affect, life satisfaction (LS). We review the research literature concerning the influence of culture on SWB. We argue that some types of well-being, as well as their causes, are consistent across cultures, whereas there are also unique patterns of well-being in societies that are not comparable across cultures. Thus, well-being can be understood to some degree in universal terms, but must also be understood within the framework of each culture. We review the methodological challenges to assessing SWB in different cultures. One important question for future research is the degree to which feelings of well-being lead to the same outcomes in different cultures. The overarching theme of the paper is that there are pancultural experiences of SWB that can be compared across cultures, but that there are also culture-specific patterns that make cultures unique in their experience of well-being.

## Introduction

With great perseverance  
He meditates, seeking  
Freedom and happiness.  
—from THE BUDDHA, Chapter 2, *The Dhammapada*

Over two thousand years ago, the Buddha perceived suffering to be the nature of existence. But for him, the attainment of nirvana was not simply a break from this cycle of suffering, it was also a return to true bliss. Although it was not the direct purpose of meditation, happiness was certainly an important consequence, and a critical topic in Buddhist philosophy (Gaskins, 1999). Across time and cultures, generations of people have in their own way reflected upon the question of happiness. As long as it has been pondered, it may come as a surprise that the scientific

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study of happiness, or subjective well-being (SWB; Diener, 1984) has advanced only recently.

One of the challenges has been defining happiness in a way that enables it to be measured. Given that conceptions of happiness may vary across different societies, a number of questions arises regarding *how* culture influences the idea and experience of happiness. Does the structure and content of SWB differ? Do certain cultures emphasize some components more than others? Are the correlates and causes of happiness similar across cultures? Do people react differently to the experience of well-being (e.g., when they feel pleasant affect)?

As it has been studied over the past two decades, SWB involves frequent pleasant emotion, infrequent unpleasant emotion, and life satisfaction (LS). The first two components are affective; the last is a cognitive evaluation. These three components are not the only elements of SWB. Happiness also can be said to consist of other dimensions such as meaning and purpose in life. However, in this review we focus on LS, pleasant affect, and unpleasant affect in part because these constructs have been researched more frequently across cultures. Furthermore, these components of SWB are major focal points that allow for a certain degree of precision in measuring the fuzzier, folk concept of happiness.

### ***Why Study SWB Across Cultures?***

The cross-cultural study of SWB is one indicator of the quality of life in a society. It was once considered taboo to suggest that societies could be evaluated at all (Shweder, 2000). To appraise *any* aspect of a culture was to ignore its worth and integrity. However, this extreme form of cultural relativism has given way to the view that, though one must be careful in comparing and evaluating societies, they may differ in variables such as health and satisfaction that are desirable in most cultures. It is true that some indicators of life quality may impose values about the good life that are not shared by all people. However, even if SWB is internally framed with respect to each culture, societies could still be evaluated in terms of how well they succeed according to these internal criteria.

Culture and SWB research can also shed light on basic emotional processes. In measuring SWB across various societies, researchers have confronted issues regarding the universality of emotions, and how the representation of emotions in memory are influenced by cultural norms. The field can also add to our understanding of culture. For example, how do cultures differ in their socialization of pleasant and unpleasant affect, and how do emotions contribute to the reinforcement of cultural values and practices? These questions reflect a cultural psychological perspective. Thus, the topic is of both applied and theoretical importance.

### ***History of This Field of Inquiry***

Anthropologists adopted cultural relativity as a way of avoiding a Western, ethnocentric bias in observing other cultures. They made the important observation that

values and practices might vary across cultures, but this need not imply that some cultures were necessarily better than others. In particular, we should avoid judging other cultures by the standards of our own. However, taken to extremes, cultural relativism would prevent one from saying that Nazi Germany, or Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, were in many respects undesirable cultures (Edgerton, 1992). This level of extreme value relativity would make cultural psychology irrelevant to public discourse. According to Edgerton (1992), not all practices in a culture are adaptive; some may even be harmful. He defined maladaptive cultures as those in which there was rampant dissatisfaction or impaired physical and mental health. Thus, there are certain criteria by which we can judge the success of a culture. As one such criterion, SWB is important because a society functions poorly when a majority of its people are discontent and depressed.

It should be noted that very little quantitative work has examined the well-being of small cultures (e.g., Biswas-Diener, Vittersø, & Diener, 2005), although a number of international surveys of SWB in modern nations have been conducted (e.g., Cantril, 1965; Inglehart, 1990; see Table 1). Only recently has research examined the structure and causes of SWB in different cultures. In 1995, for example, E. Diener and M.L. Diener found that self-esteem correlated more strongly with LS in individualist than in collectivist cultures, and that financial satisfaction more strongly predicted LS in poor than in rich nations. Since then, there has been a rapid growth in the field of culture and well-being, and both universal and unique correlates of SWB have been documented. We foresee further growth in this research area in the decade to come.

## **General Approaches to Cross-Cultural Comparisons of SWB**

The comparisons that researchers make across cultures are guided by their assumptions about the interplay between culture and SWB. We review some of these approaches below.

### ***Dimensional Approach***

Some theorists hold that the causes of well-being are fundamentally the same for all people. Ryff and Singer (1998) posited that purpose in life, quality relationships, self-regard, and a sense of mastery were universal features of well-being. Self-determination theorists (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) maintain that well-being hinges on the fulfillment of *innate* psychological needs such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness. If these sources of well-being are universal, they provide dimensions along which we can compare societies. Cultures should differ in SWB to the extent that they provide people with different levels autonomy, meaning, and relationships.

A related perspective is the universalist position on emotions. Drawing on diverse findings, some researchers propose that there are discrete, basic emotions that appear in all cultures (Ekman & Friesen, 1971; Izard & Malatesta, 1987;

**Table 1** Life satisfaction in various nations (1999–2002)\*

| Nation             | Year | LS   | SD   |
|--------------------|------|------|------|
| Puerto Rico        | 2001 | 8.49 | 1.97 |
| Denmark            | 1999 | 8.24 | 1.82 |
| Malta              | 1999 | 8.21 | 1.62 |
| Ireland            | 1999 | 8.20 | 1.83 |
| Mexico             | 2000 | 8.14 | 2.35 |
| Iceland            | 1999 | 8.05 | 1.59 |
| Austria            | 1999 | 8.03 | 1.92 |
| Northern Ireland   | 1999 | 8.00 | 1.75 |
| Finland            | 2000 | 7.87 | 1.65 |
| Netherlands        | 1999 | 7.85 | 1.34 |
| Canada             | 2000 | 7.85 | 1.88 |
| Luxembourg         | 1999 | 7.81 | 1.87 |
| USA                | 1999 | 7.66 | 1.82 |
| Sweden             | 1999 | 7.64 | 1.86 |
| Venezuela          | 2000 | 7.52 | 2.50 |
| El Salvador        | 1999 | 7.50 | 2.43 |
| Belgium            | 1999 | 7.43 | 2.13 |
| Germany            | 1999 | 7.42 | 1.96 |
| Great Britain      | 1999 | 7.40 | 1.94 |
| Argentina          | 1999 | 7.30 | 2.26 |
| Singapore          | 2002 | 7.24 | 1.80 |
| Italy              | 1999 | 7.17 | 2.11 |
| Chile              | 2000 | 7.12 | 2.16 |
| Spain              | 1999 | 7.09 | 1.92 |
| Czech Republic     | 1999 | 7.06 | 1.97 |
| Portugal           | 1999 | 7.04 | 1.96 |
| Israel             | 2001 | 7.03 | 2.17 |
| France             | 1999 | 7.01 | 1.99 |
| Indonesia          | 2001 | 6.96 | 2.06 |
| Nigeria            | 2000 | 6.87 | 2.32 |
| Croatia            | 1999 | 6.68 | 2.30 |
| Greece             | 1999 | 6.67 | 2.19 |
| Philippines        | 2001 | 6.65 | 2.53 |
| China              | 2001 | 6.53 | 2.47 |
| Vietnam            | 2001 | 6.52 | 2.06 |
| Japan              | 2000 | 6.48 | 1.97 |
| Peru               | 2001 | 6.44 | 2.40 |
| Iran               | 2000 | 6.38 | 2.41 |
| South Africa       | 2001 | 6.31 | 2.69 |
| South Korea        | 2001 | 6.21 | 2.32 |
| Poland             | 1999 | 6.20 | 2.53 |
| Morocco            | 2001 | 6.06 | 2.54 |
| Slovakia           | 1999 | 6.03 | 2.22 |
| Estonia            | 1999 | 5.93 | 2.18 |
| Hungary            | 1999 | 5.80 | 2.42 |
| Bosnia-Herzegovina | 2001 | 5.77 | 2.39 |
| Bangladesh         | 2002 | 5.77 | 2.18 |
| Algeria            | 2002 | 5.67 | 2.86 |
| Uganda             | 2001 | 5.65 | 2.47 |
| Montenegro         | 2001 | 5.64 | 2.38 |
| Turkey             | 2000 | 5.62 | 2.79 |

**Table 1** (continued)

| Nation    | Year | LS   | SD   |
|-----------|------|------|------|
| Serbia    | 2001 | 5.62 | 2.47 |
| Jordan    | 2001 | 5.60 | 2.50 |
| Bulgaria  | 1999 | 5.50 | 2.65 |
| Egypt     | 2000 | 5.36 | 3.35 |
| Latvia    | 1999 | 5.27 | 2.39 |
| Romania   | 1999 | 5.23 | 2.77 |
| Lithuania | 1999 | 5.20 | 2.66 |
| Albania   | 2002 | 5.17 | 2.25 |
| India     | 2001 | 5.14 | 2.23 |
| Macedonia | 2001 | 5.12 | 2.72 |
| Pakistan  | 2001 | 4.85 | 1.46 |
| Belarus   | 2000 | 4.81 | 2.21 |
| Russia    | 1999 | 4.56 | 2.57 |
| Ukraine   | 1999 | 4.56 | 2.59 |
| Moldova   | 2000 | 4.56 | 2.32 |
| Zimbabwe  | 2001 | 3.95 | 2.79 |
| Tanzania  | 2001 | 3.87 | 3.22 |

*Note:* Life satisfaction scores are based on responses to the question “All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as-a-whole now?” on a 10-pt scale from 1 (*dissatisfied*) to 10 (*satisfied*).

*Source.* Veenhoven (n.d.).

Plutchik, 1980; Tomkins, 1962, 1963). For example, facial expressions of anger, sadness, and joy appear early in infancy (Izard & Malatesta, 1987), and are easily recognized in many different cultures (Ekman & Friesen, 1971; Ekman et al., 1987). Facial expressions of laughing and crying among congenitally blind infants (Thompson, 1941) suggest that there may be genetic programs directing the expression of emotions. The possibility of biologically based, basic emotions is important for it implies that we can compare people across societies on these emotions (however, see Ortony & Turner, 1990 for a critique of the basic emotions concept).

### ***Uniqueness Approach***

In contrast to the universalist approach, some ethnographers emphasize emotions as social constructions. According to these researchers, the very concept of emotion may differ across cultures. Lutz (1988) noted that Western ethnopsychologies often view emotions as hidden and private. In contrast, her work in Micronesia revealed that Ifalukian concepts of emotions were more public and relational. Cultures may also differ in their labeling of specific feelings. For example, according to Wierzbicka (1986) there is no word for disgust in Polish. Extreme versions of the uniqueness approach hold that emotions are purely a Western idea, and that internal experiences can be represented in countless ways across cultures. More moderate formulations, on the other hand, maintain that biologically based emotions

may be universal, but that culture can significantly alter their development and labelling. Thus, although sadness is often considered a basic emotion with recognizable antecedents, the Tahitians do not appear to have such a label for it (Levy, 1982). Instead, they often refer to feelings of sickness or exhaustion, for which the causes are nonspecific. Although the uniqueness approach does not preclude the possibility of making comparisons across cultures (e.g., Wierzbicka, 1986), it takes as its starting point the culturally patterned subtleties of emotional experience.

### *Identity Approach*

Another perspective on universality is that regardless of the specific elements, all cultures enjoy *identical levels* of SWB. Cultures may differ in their values and in the needs they fulfill, but people eventually adapt leading all societies to be relatively happy. The identity approach likens well-being to a “hedonic treadmill” upon which people run but never change position. Only when cultures are severely disrupted or experiencing trauma (e.g., warfare or famine) will adaptation be impossible, resulting in widespread unhappiness. This position may sound absurd, but in Table 2, diverse groups appear enjoy somewhat comparable levels of LS. For instance, the Amish, Inughuit, and Maasai all report LS that is not significantly different from the richest Americans, suggesting that material luxury is not necessary for well-being. All these groups may be meeting needs such as social relationships, which are critical for SWB. Thus, there may be important conditions for happiness that are met in non-industrial societies such as the Maasai. In contrast, the LS of the homeless indicates that not all groups are happy, and that people do not fully adapt to all conditions.

**Table 2** Life satisfaction of selected groups

| Positive groups   | Life satisfaction |
|---|-------------------|
| <i>Forbes</i> Richest Americans <sup>a</sup>                | 5.8               |
| Pennsylvania Amish <sup>b</sup>                             | 5.8               |
| Inughuit (Inuit Group from Northern Greenland) <sup>c</sup> | 5.8               |
| East African Maasai <sup>c</sup>                            | 5.4               |
| International College Students (47 nations) <sup>b</sup>    | 4.9               |
| Calcutta Slum Dwellers <sup>d</sup>                         | 4.6               |
| <i>Neutral point of scale=4.0</i>                           |                   |
| <i>Groups below neutral (below neutral)</i>                 |                   |
| Calcutta Sex Workers <sup>d</sup>                           | 3.6               |
| Calcutta Homeless <sup>d</sup>                              | 3.2               |
| California Homeless <sup>b</sup>                            | 2.9               |

*Note:* Life satisfaction scores are based on responses to the statement “You are satisfied with your life,” on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

<sup>a</sup>Diener Horwitz, and Emmons (1985).

<sup>b</sup>Diener and Seligman (2005).

<sup>c</sup>Biswas-Diener et al. (2005).

<sup>d</sup>Diener and Biswas-Diener (2000).

## ***The Middle Path***

In this chapter, we take a middle path. We argue that there are some universals, such as the tendency for people to be *slightly* happy unless they are exposed to harsh conditions. Some variables influence SWB in all cultures such as temperament and positive relationships. There may also be common goals, such as the need for respect, that characterize people in all cultures. Furthermore, because cultural influences often permeate national boundaries, cultures are not completely independent of one another. However, each culture also retains unique qualities and should not be compared with others in a careless way. Not all comparisons of SWB are meaningful because the value placed on certain subjective states and the labels for them, often differ. The patterning of well-being may also vary across cultures, making it dangerous to compare variables at a high level of abstraction. Thus, although comparisons are possible, they should only be made with due care to the unique factors present in various societies.

Cultural differences in SWB can be likened to differences between individuals. People can be compared on certain universal features such as height and weight. They can also be compared on factors such as health, but health is made up of many lower-order concepts that may relate to each other differently across individuals. Although societies can be compared on longevity, the patterns of illness differ across cultures. In a similar way, cultures can be compared on SWB, but there are also unique facets of well-being in each society that are best captured by specific descriptions of the local culture.

In the sections that follow, we cover several major topics in culture and SWB research. We begin with the issue of patterning and structure, examining how the elements of SWB cohere across societies. Next, we consider whether cultures differ in mean levels of SWB where the structures can be compared, and what factors might contribute to these differences. We then review various correlates and causes of SWB, showing both similarities and differences in cultural recipes for happiness. Following this discussion, we ask whether SWB leads to the same outcomes in different cultures, or whether there are unique effects that depend on the role of emotions in a culture. Finally, we assess the various challenges involved in measuring SWB across cultures, and the impact that measurement artifacts may have on the findings.

## **Patterning and Structure**

The validity of cross-cultural comparisons of SWB depends on how it is structured in different societies. If there are both universal and culture-specific emotions, are aggregates like pleasant and unpleasant affect applicable in all cultures? Is the concept of LS understood by people in all societies? Also, do the three components of SWB relate to each other similarly across cultures? We review the research bearing on these issues below.

## *Levels of Analyses*

As discussed earlier, the existence of universal emotions has been debated for some time. Researchers have used a number of methodologies to answer the question of universality including ethnography, facial expression recognition, and emotion taxonomies. After conducting cross-cultural research on facial expression recognition, Ekman and his colleagues (Ekman & Friesen, 1971; Ekman et al., 1987) suggested that happiness, anger, fear, sadness, and disgust were universal. However, there are also emotions that appear in some cultures, but not others. Some appear to be labeling of specific situation-outcome pairings in relation to feelings. In Japan, for example, the term *kanashii* refers specifically to sadness arising from personal loss (Mesquita & Frijda, 1992). Other indigenous emotions seem to be complex blends such as *aviman* in India, which has been described as “prideful, loving anger” (Scollon, Diener, Oishi, & Biswas-Diener, 2004).

According to Mesquita, Fridja, and Scherer (1997), the debate over universality has hindered culture and emotion research by focusing on the mere presence of certain emotions in a culture rather than on how emotions are “practiced.” They argued that emotional experience is a process that includes appraisal of a situation, physiological reactions, overt behaviors and other components. What distinguishes one emotion from another is the *pattern* of components. At a general level, universal patterns of emotional experience may exist, due to innate, neurophysiological programs. For example, joy may inherently feel pleasant and evoke the urge to laugh or smile. However, at the level of specific components, cultural differences may abound. The *type* of events that elicit joy, or attempts to regulate it may vary across societies.

The perspective provided by Mesquita et al. resonates with several lines of research on well-being. In assessing the cross-cultural applicability of pleasant and unpleasant affect, SWB researchers have not only been interested in *which* emotions are present, but also in how frequently they are experienced, how they are patterned, and how norms can shape the structure and composition of pleasant and unpleasant affect. In short, the field of culture and SWB has been concerned as much with the ecology or practice of emotions (Mesquita et al., 1997), as it has with the comparability of SWB across cultures. We will see that the distinction between pleasant and unpleasant affect can be made at a general level, and that there are both similarities and differences in the specific aspects of these emotions.

## *Structural Evidence*

In an early study, Watson, Clark, and Tellegen (1984) found that the mood structure of Japanese participants formed two factors identifiable as positive and negative affect. This two-factor structure was very similar to that of American participants. Hierarchical cluster analyses of emotion words from the U.S., Italy, and China also revealed superordinate groupings of positive and negative emotions (Shaver, Wu, & Schwartz, 1992). Pleasant and unpleasant emotion clusters were also observed

in experience sampling data provided by Japanese, Indian, and two American samples (Scollon et al., 2004). Moreover, indigenous emotions that were included in the Japanese and Indian samples did not form separate clusters, but grouped together with the pleasant and unpleasant emotions.

M.L. Diener, Fujita, Kim-Prieto, and E. Diener (2004) studied the frequency of twelve emotions and found that they formed positive and negative clusters in seven regions of the world (Africa, Latin America, East Asia, Southeast Asia, West Asia, Eastern Europe, and Western Europe). Moreover, in virtually all of these regions, a core group of emotions consistently loaded onto either positive or negative clusters. That is, positive emotions consisted of *pleasant*, *cheerful*, and *happy*, whereas negative emotions consisted of *unpleasant*, *sad*, and *angry*. Similarly, Shaver et al. (1992) found that one positive (*joy*) and three negative emotions (*anger*, *sadness*, and *fear*) formed basic level categories in all three cultures they studied. Finally, Kuppens, Ceulemans, Timmerman, Diener, and Kim-Prieto (2006) found that positive affect and negative affect emerged as strong universal intracultural dimensions, as well as smaller but significant nation-level dimensions on which nations could be discriminated.

Thus, when speaking of emotion aggregates, there is compelling evidence that pleasant and unpleasant affect are perceived in all cultures. There is also support for the universality of particular emotions such as joy, anger, and sadness. However, cultural differences may arise regarding more specific emotions. For instance, outside of the core emotions, M.L. Diener et al. (2004) observed differences in how other emotions clustered. *Pride* clustered with positive emotions in Latin America, Western Europe, and East Asia, but with the negative emotions in Africa, Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, and West Asia. *Pride* also aligned with the negative emotions among smaller samples in India and Italy (Scollon et al., 2004; Shaver et al., 1992). These findings should be interpreted cautiously. The simple fact that pride clusters with negative emotions in a culture does not necessarily mean that it is experienced as a negative emotion. In the case of M.L. Diener et al.'s data, the cluster analyses were based on the frequency of experience and included weights for means, standard deviations, and correlations—any of which could have affected how emotion terms clustered. In those regions where *pride* was experienced less frequently, it clustered with the negative emotions, which were generally experienced less often than the positive emotions. In contrast, *worry* and *stress* clustered with the positive emotions in Western Europe and East Asia primarily because they were frequently experienced in those areas. Thus, emotional experience may be universal in some ways, but culturally varied in other ways. Recently, Kuppens et al. (in press) found that although positive affect and negative affect emerged as strong universal intracultural dimensions, there were also smaller but significant nation-level dimensions of emotional experience on which nations could be discriminated.

Differences in the frequency of emotions may be related to cultural norms. For example, cultural norms might make some situations more common than others. Thus, the American cultural environment might afford more opportunities for self-enhancement (and the experience of pride), whereas the Japanese cultural

environment might be more conducive to self-criticism (Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997). According to Markus & Kitayama (1994), normative social behavior and cultural models of the self might also shape the desirability of certain emotions. In individualist cultures, pride is an enjoyable emotion that highlights individual achievement as well as success in meeting the cultural goals of autonomy and independence. However, in collectivist cultures, emotions resulting from sympathy and humility may feel good because they are consistent with the cultural goals of interdependence. Emotions that conflict with these norms may be de-emphasized and less frequently experienced. Thus, pride may not be as valued in some collectivist Asian cultures because it is self-focusing and separates the individual from the group (Kitayama & Markus, 2000; Markus & Kitayama, 1994; Scollon et al., 2004). In a similar way, the Oriyas in India devalue anger because it is regarded as socially destructive (Menon & Shweder, 1994). On the other hand, shame<sup>1</sup> is viewed as a good emotion for *women* to have because it is integral to sustaining the patriarchal order of society.

The Oriya case draws attention to *intracultural* variation in emotion norms. That is, norms may not apply or be uniformly perceived across all individuals within a culture. Eid and Diener (2001) investigated this issue by examining the desirability and appropriateness of pleasant and unpleasant affect in the U.S., Australia, China, and Taiwan. They found that norms for pleasant emotions (e.g., joy, affection, pride, and contentment) were more heterogeneous in China and Taiwan than in the U.S. and Australia. For instance, the vast majority (83%) of Australians and Americans regarded all four pleasant emotions as appropriate. In contrast, only 9% of Chinese and 32% of Taiwanese felt this way. A majority of the Taiwanese (57%) had mixed feelings about pride, although joy, affection, and contentment were appropriate. A plurality of the Chinese (32%) felt that joy and affection were appropriate, but that pride was clearly inappropriate. Another class of individuals found only among the Chinese (16%), regarded all pleasant emotions as *inappropriate*. These findings suggest that culture may influence emotion norms in two ways. First, cultures may foster unique normative patterns, as was observed in the Chinese sample. Second, some patterns may be pancultural, but their relative frequency within cultures may differ. All pleasant emotions are clearly favored in the U.S. and Australia. The ambivalence towards pride in China and Taiwan is consistent with previous research on collectivist Asian cultures.

However, the relation between emotion norms and emotional experience may not always be direct. Recent work by Tsai, Knutson, and Fung (2006) suggests that the emotions that people value (ideal affect) are not necessarily the ones they experience most frequently (real affect), although the correlations are moderate.

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<sup>1</sup> The Oriya emotion *lajya* or *lajja* was translated by Menon and Shweder (1994) as shame. However, a less negative, alternative translation is “feeling shy.” These two emotions are related but not the same. We thank Vijay Kumar Shrotryia for this observation. Our point is simply that, the meaning of an emotion (and hence its value) can shift in different cultural contexts in ways that are not obvious from its valence alone.

These researchers found that although cultural values predicted the *preference* for high versus low arousal pleasant emotions, the reported *frequency* of these emotions was better predicted by personality traits. Furthermore, norms may influence some emotions more than others. M.L. Diener et al. (2004) found that the correlation between the appropriateness and frequency of an emotion was larger for “secondary” emotions like pride, guilt, gratitude, and jealousy, than it was for the core emotions. That is, norms appear to predict the experience of secondary emotions more than the experience of core emotions. Indeed, the main cultural differences in structure were due to how the secondary emotions clustered, and the various geopolitical regions diverged most in the frequency of these emotions. For example, people from Southeast Asia reported more frequent experience of guilt and shame, whereas those from Latin America registered more pride than people from other areas. Also, norms for pride and guilt were more variable across cultures than norms for other emotions (Eid & Diener, 2001). Differences in the experience of peripheral emotions such as pride may reflect cultural ideologies regarding attribution styles, such as whether success should be attributed to the self or to the situation (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999). In contrast, a core emotion like happiness is much broader and may tend to follow from outcomes that are considered good in each culture, so that valuing general happiness is likely to be more common across cultures.

In addition to emotions, there is also support for similarity in the structure of LS across cultures. Vittersø, Røysamb, and Diener (2002) carried out confirmatory factor analyses on the five items of the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Gribbin, 1985) and found that a one-factor model fit the data reasonably well in forty-one nations. In all nations, the comparative fit index was above 0.90. This finding suggests that the SWLS measures a single construct and that the concept of “life satisfaction” may be similarly understood across a wide range of cultures. That is not to say that the *criteria* for LS are universal, but rather that people in a number of diverse cultures appear to react to queries about LS in a consistent way.

### ***The Relation Between Emotions and Life Satisfaction (LS)***

Although the structure of emotions is somewhat consistent across cultures, and the items of the SWLS also seem to cohere reliably, the relation between emotions and LS may vary across cultures (Schimmack, Radhakrishnan, Oishi, Dzokoto & Ahadi, 2002; Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998). Suh et al. (1998) examined the relation between LS and affect balance (the difference in frequency of pleasant and unpleasant affect). They found that LS and affect balance correlated positively across forty nations; thus, experiencing more pleasant than unpleasant affect predicted greater LS across cultures. However, the correlations were stronger in more individualist countries. Suh et al. (Study 2) also assessed cultural norms for LS by asking

participants what they perceived to be the ideal level of LS in their culture. When LS was predicted from both emotions and perceived norms for LS, the former was highly predictive among individualist cultures, accounting for 76% of the variance in LS. In contrast, norms and emotions were equally predictive of LS in collectivist cultures, accounting for 39 and 40% of the variance, respectively. A possible explanation is that in individualist cultures, where personal goals and preferences are emphasized, emotions may be important because one's own feelings are often a relevant factor in one's judgments. However, in collectivist cultures, there may be a greater tendency to use norms as a guide for one's attitudes and behavior and not be the "nail that stands out". Thus, when judging their LS, people from collectivist cultures might weigh norms at least as much as their own emotions. This raises the possibility that collectivists are simply responding in a normatively appropriate manner. Though it is difficult to rule out this alternative explanation, other data suggest that this is not invariably the case. For example, perceived norms for negative emotions were not reliably related to self-reported frequency of these emotions among Chinese and Taiwanese respondents (Eid & Diener, 2001; we discuss further methodological issues later in the chapter).

## *Conclusions*

There are universals in the structure of SWB that make some comparisons possible. Pleasant affect, unpleasant affect, and LS are not concepts that are unfamiliar to most of the world's people. Nevertheless, to some degree, cultural norms shape which emotions are pleasant and unpleasant to feel. Therefore, when using aggregates such as pleasant and unpleasant affect, one must be careful because specific emotions may cohere differently with the larger aggregate. The comparison of emotion aggregates should only be made with emotions that cohere similarly in each culture. Finally, emotions may be more relevant to global LS in individualist cultures, where internal experience is highly valued. This difference highlights the importance of measuring emotions and LS as separate components of SWB. That is affective and cognitive evaluations of well-being reflect different aspects of the superordinate construct of SWB.

## **Comparing the Mean Levels of SWB of Cultures**

In discussing the happiness of societies, it may seem surprising that a majority of people in the world report being happy. That is not to say that all of humanity is in state of elation or jubilation, or that there is no variation across cultures in overall levels of well-being. There may be a wide range of economic, sociocultural, and biological factors that affect the mean level of subjective well-being in a society, but in most cultures the mean level is above neutral.

## ***Most People Are Happy***

A study involving 31 nations ( $N = 13,118$ ) revealed that 63% of men and 70% of women reported positive levels of LS (E. Diener & M. Diener, 1995). These findings could be limited in that many of the nations that were studied were fairly industrialized, and most of the participants were college students. However, E. Diener and C. Diener (1996) plotted the distribution of mean SWB responses from nationally representative samples from 43 nations and found that 86% were above the neutral point (see Table 1 for more data based on representative, probability samples). Furthermore, positive levels of well-being appear to be fairly stable over time. National levels of SWB in the U.S., Japan, and France fluctuated over a 46-year period, but never dipped below neutral (Veenhoven, 1993). Positive levels of well-being have also been observed among smaller, non-industrialized societies such as the Maasai in Kenya, the Inughuit in Greenland, and the Amish in the U.S. (Biswas-Diener, Vittersø, & Diener, 2005).

The claim that “most people are happy” is not meant to deny that there remains significant ill-being and suffering in the world. It is important to note that data from the poorest nations of the world—e.g., Rwanda, Mozambique, and Afghanistan—are often lacking (see Table 1). Moreover, although most people report levels of SWB above the midpoint, very few report being extremely happy. Only 4% of E. Diener and M. Diener’s (1995) sample were at the top of the scale in LS. Similarly, although the Maasai, Inughuit, and Amish were all significantly above neutral on several measures of SWB, a very small minority reported perfect LS, or *always* experiencing pleasant affect (Biswas-Diener et al., 2005). Thus, the skew in well-being seems to reflect a moderate form of happiness. Although measurement artifacts are an important concern (see Methodological Issues), the replicability of these findings across numerous societies, and over a number of different methods is impressive.

Perhaps it should not seem so shocking that most people are at least mildly happy with their lives. Some researchers argue that a disposition toward pleasant affect facilitates exploratory behavior, which could have conferred evolutionary advantages (E. Diener & C. Diener, 1996; Fredrickson, 1998; Ito & Cacioppo, 1999). According to Ito and Cacioppo (1999), the motivational system is slightly biased toward approach behavior, even in the absence of stimuli – a phenomenon called “positivity offset.” Such a bias would be more advantageous than a purely neutral disposition because, in the absence of danger, it would help humans learn more about their environment. As a consequence of broadening behavioral and attentional foci, positive emotions might also have helped humans to build social relationships and other resources important for survival (Fredrickson, 1998). The connection between pleasant affect and approach tendencies receives some support from a 27-nation study by Wallbott and Scherer (1988). With few cultural differences, participants reported that “moving toward” was an action tendency most characteristic of joy, whereas “withdrawing” was more typical of unpleasant emotions.

In light of the above research, it becomes important to ask when and why a society falls below the midpoint of SWB. One trend that has been observed is that

people living in severe destitution often report being unhappy. Prostitutes and homeless people living in Calcutta, India, reported negative levels of LS (Biswas-Diener & Diener, 2001). The LS of Malaysian farmers living below the poverty line also fell below the midpoint (Howell, Howell, & Schwabe, 2006). Difficulty in meeting basic needs, or other circumstances such as lack of respect, might have decreased the well-being of these groups. In the next section, we consider how economic factors might influence the SWB of a society.

### ***Economic Development and Related Variables***

The wealth of a nation frequently correlates with its level of SWB. Depending on whether one looks at purchasing power or per capita gross domestic product, the correlation between economic wealth and the SWB of a nation ranges from 0.58 to 0.84 (E. Diener, M. Diener, & C. Diener, 1995; Inglehart & Klingemann, 2000; Veenhoven, 1991). As robust as this finding is, the exact process by which economic development increases happiness remains unclear.

Wealthier societies are better able to meet the basic needs of their citizens and this contributes to SWB (E. Diener & M. Diener, et al., 1995). We will consider the role of basic need fulfillment in a later section. For now, it is also worth noting that economic development is often associated with many other social conditions. For example, wealth correlates with greater human rights, as well as greater equality (in income, access to education, and between the sexes; E. Diener & M. Diener, et al., 1995). Rights and equality also correlate with each other. Further still, people in wealthier nations are often more satisfied with friends and home life (Diener & Suh, 1999). A possible explanation proposed by Ahuvia (2002) is that rising wealth alters the cultural environment by freeing the individual from economic dependence on his or her family. This independence could attenuate norms for reciprocity while facilitating the pursuit of individual happiness (e.g., by allowing more choice in friends and lifestyle). Thus, several mechanisms are possible and the various correlates of wealth make it difficult to isolate the unique contribution of wealth to SWB. The relation between economic development and SWB is thus entangled in a causal web of several factors, and future researchers need to separate their causal influences on SWB.

Aside from economic development, Inglehart and Klingemann (2000) suggested that national levels of SWB might also reflect historical factors. In 1997, the former communist states of Eastern Europe and the U.S.S.R. had among the lowest levels of well-being—lower than nations with less wealth, but without a history of communism. Even after controlling for wealth, rights, and other variables, the number of years under communist rule negatively predicted a nation's mean level of SWB. However, Inglehart and Klingemann (2000) warn against hasty praise for capitalistic or democratic societies. Although the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union was preceded by relatively low levels of SWB, it was followed by *even lower* levels of SWB (see also Veenhoven, 2001). Political instability and economic decline after the fall of communism may have created conditions that were inimical to SWB. These ideas require further research, especially as conditions change in the region.

## *Norms for Emotions*

As mentioned earlier, the experience of well-being can be shaped by cultural norms regarding the desirability of LS or certain emotions (M.L. Diener et al., 2004; Suh et al., 1998). Emotions that are desirable might be experienced more frequently than those that are seen as inappropriate (M.L. Diener et al., 2004) or they may correlate more with general happiness (Markus & Kitayama, 1994). Norms for emotions may explain why Asian—especially East Asian—samples often report lower SWB than those from Europe and the Americas (E. Diener & M. Diener, 1995; Kang, Shaver, Sue, Min, & Jing, 2003; Sheldon et al., 2004; Suh, 2002). Economic development may be a factor, but it cannot completely account for the lower SWB of East Asians. For example, Japan has greater purchasing power than many Latin American nations (E. Diener, M. Diener, et al., 1995), yet it reports lower SWB than do the latter (Diener & Suh, 1999; Diener & Oishi, 2000). This could be because Japanese and other Asians show a greater acceptance of unpleasant emotions than people in the Americas (Diener & Suh, 1999). Moreover, East Asians may also value low activation positive affect (e.g., serene) more than high activation positive affect (e.g., excited) because these emotions facilitate collectivist goals of attending to the social context (Tsai et al., 2006).

How might emotion norms translate into experience? One pathway is through the socialization of emotions in children (M.L. Diener & Lucas, 2004), through the willingness to report specific emotions, or through recall of which emotions are experienced (Oishi, 2002). Wirtz (2004) asked participants to report how they felt about past events, both currently and at the time of the event. Whether the emotions were pleasant or unpleasant, Japanese participants' current feelings were less intense than they were remembered to be in the past. In contrast, European Americans reported significant decay for unpleasant but not pleasant emotions. Thus, cultural norms might also shape the relation between recalled emotions and current feelings, which might also influence judgments about current LS.

Schimmack, Oishi, and Diener (2002) suggested that East Asian views of pleasant and unpleasant emotions might be rooted in the dialecticism of Asian philosophies (e.g., Buddhism and Daoism) that have historically shaped these cultures. For example, in Chinese folk wisdom, both sides of a contradiction are equally likely, and a compromise between the two is preferable (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). East Asian emotion norms may be dialectical in the sense that a middle way between extreme pleasant and extreme unpleasant affect is considered desirable. In contrast, many Western European and Latin American cultures prefer pleasant over unpleasant affect. These cultural differences are reflected in emotion reports. Among participants from Western Europe and the Americas, the frequency of pleasant affect was inversely related to the frequency of unpleasant affect (Schimmack et al., 2002). Among Asian participants, however, this negative correlation was weak (see also Bagozzi, Wong, & Yi, 1999). Kitayama et al. (2000) actually observed a *positive* correlation between pleasant and unpleasant affect in Japan. Finally, over a one-week period of experience sampling, Scollon et al. (2004) found that European- and Hispanic Americans experienced more pleasant affect than Asians and Asian Americans. Moreover, there were no differences in unpleasant emotions. Asians and

Asian Americans did not experience as much pleasant affect as the other groups, but they were not biased in the direction of greater unpleasant affect either.

Are East Asians simply unhappy at worst and apathetic at best? Caution must be taken not to equate lower levels of well-being as *ill-being*. First, the SWB of East Asians is lower *in comparison to* Latin Americans and Western Europeans. Although mean levels of SWB are often lower among Asian samples, they are rarely below the neutral midpoint. Second, Kitayama and Markus (2000) note that balance and moderation are central to East Asian concepts of health. A preference for low rather than high activation positive affect may be consistent with this perspective (Tsai et al., 2006).

Another source of cultural variation in emotion norms may be religious doctrine. Across 40 nations, Kim-Prieto and Diener (2004) found that Christians reported a greater frequency of happiness and less shame than Muslims, even after controlling for the effect of nations. A subsequent analysis of the emotion content of religious texts revealed that joy and love were most frequently mentioned in the New Testament whereas shame and guilt were most frequently mentioned in the Quran. Thus, differences in norms or the socialization of emotions may be rooted in religious doctrine. An important implication of these findings is that the cultural forces that impinge on SWB may extend beyond ethnic and geographic delineations.

### *Genetic Differences*

Might cultural differences in well-being be due to genetic differences between groups? Although much more research is needed, some individual differences in SWB may be related to genetics. Polymorphisms in the serotonin-related 5-HTT gene have been linked to individual differences in anxiety (Lesch et al., 1996), as well as susceptibility to depression (Caspi et al., 2003). Lykken and Tellegen (1996) maintain that roughly half of the individual variance in SWB is related to genetic variation.

A limitation of the above research is that it has been carried out within single societies, and effects *within* a sample may not necessarily be driven by the same causal forces as those *between* samples. Although there are ethnic and cultural differences in gene frequencies (Cavalli-Sforza, 1991), direct links between such differences and SWB have not yet been made. However, studies of infant temperament reinforce the possibility of genetic effects. Freedman and Freedman (1969) found ethnic differences in infants less than four days old. Compared to European American infants, Chinese American infants were calmer and less reactive to a cloth placed on their face. Similarly, four-month old infants in China exhibited less behavioral arousal than European American and Irish infants (Kagan et al., 1994). Nevertheless, the role of socialization practices cannot be overlooked. In contrast to the above findings, Ahadi, Rothbart, and Ye (1993) found that six-year old Chinese children exhibited relatively more negative affectivity than their European American peers. The authors suggested that strict Chinese socialization practices might foster

a greater sensitivity to punishment, leading to more frequent negative affect. Thus, genetic influences do not rule out the impact that life circumstances can have on the various components of SWB. Recently, Diener and colleagues (Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2005; Fujita & Diener, 2005) argued for a “soft set point” conception of SWB. People can adapt to many situations and genes may account for some of the stability in SWB. However, life events and social conditions (e.g., widowhood or poverty) can still have a substantial impact on happiness at both, the individual and group levels. Much more research on culture, genetics, and SWB is required before firm conclusions can be made.

## ***Conclusion***

In many societies, a majority of the people report being happy, but very few report extreme happiness. Although there are biological and evolutionary accounts for why this is so, other factors are likely to influence mean levels of well-being. These factors include economic development and cultural norms for emotions. However, much more research is needed before we can understand exactly how and why societal levels of SWB differ across cultures. Specifically, the exact process underlying the relation between economic development and SWB remains unclear, as well as how such development affects cultural values related to well-being.

## **Correlates and Causes of SWB**

Not only might cultures differ in the experience of emotions and their frequency, they might also differ in the causes of SWB. Often the evidence is in terms of cross-sectional correlations, however, and so we mostly review what covaries with pleasant and unpleasant affect, and LS in different cultures. Further, Kitayama and Markus (2000) suggested that SWB is not just personal happiness, but includes one’s relations with others. Thus, happiness might take different forms across cultures, with different factors causing it.

## ***The Self and SWB***

To the extent that self-concepts vary across cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), one might expect the relation between self and SWB to vary as well. For instance, although self-esteem is often a strong correlate of LS, Heine et al. (1999) questioned the need for positive self-views in collectivist cultures. In Japan, where interdependence is emphasized, a self-critical tendency may be valued as a way of improving one’s ability to meet social obligations (but see Brown & Kobayashi, 2002, 2003, for evidence of self-enhancement in Japan, and Heine’s, 2003 response). Miller, Wang, Sandel, and Cho (2002) found that rural Taiwanese mothers also placed little emphasis on developing their children’s self-esteem and some worried that high

self-esteem would impair their child's capacity to take criticism. Thus, in collectivist cultures, self-esteem may be viewed as unimportant, or even *undesirable* for achieving cultural goals. In contrast, a primary concern for European American mothers was to help their children develop and maintain a strong sense of self-esteem (Miller et al., 2002).

If high self-esteem is de-emphasized in collectivist cultures, then one might expect self-esteem to relate less strongly to LS than it would in more individualist cultures. This is exactly what a number of researchers have found (E. Diener & M. Diener, 1995; Oishi, Diener, Lucas & Suh, 1999; Park & Huebner, 2005). Although self-esteem correlated with LS across most countries, the strength of association could be predicted by the individualism of a country. For example, self-esteem and LS correlated 0.60 in the U.S., but only 0.08 among women in more collectivist India (E. Diener & M. Diener, 1995). Similarly, Park and Huebner (2005) found that satisfaction with self was a much stronger predictor of LS for U.S. adolescents than it was for Korean adolescents. As with emotions (Suh et al., 1998), people in collectivist cultures may be guided by norms downplaying the importance of self-esteem when they make life satisfaction judgments. Alternatively, people with high self-esteem may be frowned upon in collectivist cultures for holding or expressing attitudes that violate norms. Of course, norms should also influence the factors that *do* correlate with LS. For example, Park and Huebner suggested that the heavy emphasis on academic achievement in Korea might explain why school satisfaction predicted LS for Korean adolescents but not for American adolescents.

Another characteristic that may be less socially valued in collectivist cultures and less important for SWB is identity consistency. In traditional Western psychology, self-consistency across situations implies a coherent self-identity and good mental health. However, in East Asian cultures, where individuals are expected to adjust themselves to the social situation, identity consistency might be taken as a sign of immaturity. Suh (2002) found that Americans evinced greater consistency across social roles than Koreans. For example, if Americans were talkative with their friends, they were also more likely to be talkative with parents, siblings, and strangers than were Koreans. Furthermore, identity consistency was a much stronger predictor of SWB for Americans than Koreans. Not only were self-consistent individuals happier in the American sample, but they were also rated by informants as more likable and socially skilled than less consistent individuals. In contrast, Korean informants showed no such preference for consistent targets (Suh, 2002).

Culture may also affect the relation between personality and LS. On the one hand, research suggests that the influence of personality on emotional experience may be pancultural (Lucas, Diener, Grob, Suh, & Shao, 2000; Tsai et al., 2006). In five countries, Schimmack et al. (2002) found that extraversion correlated positively with affect balance, whereas neuroticism was negatively correlated. Moreover, the relation between personality and LS was mediated by affect balance. Thus, extraverts enjoy greater LS in part because they experience frequent pleasant affect. However, because the relation between *emotions* and LS was stronger in individualist cultures (see *Patterning and Structure*), the relation between personality and LS was also moderated by culture. Thus, extraversion and neuroticism were more

predictive of LS in individualist cultures (Germany and the U.S.) than in collectivist cultures (Ghana, Japan, Mexico). Extraverts everywhere may experience more pleasant affect than neurotics, but how much this contributes to LS may depend on the cultural value of emotional experience. Alternatively, Benet-Martínez and Karakitapoglu-Aygun (2003) proposed that cultures favor the development of some personality traits over others. They found that individualism predicted both extraversion and neuroticism, and that the relationship between personality and LS was mediated by self-esteem and friendship satisfaction.

An important issue concerns the role of autonomy in SWB. Self-determination theorists (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) contend that autonomy is a basic human need that, if not fulfilled, will lead to lower levels of well-being. One source of the debate may be the very definition of autonomy. For example, Oishi (2000) operationalized autonomy as horizontal individualism (i.e., an emphasis on independence and individual self-worth). He found that the positive association between autonomy and LS was stronger in more individualist nations like Australia and Denmark, than it was in more collectivist nations like China, Korea, and Bahrain. However, Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, and Kaplan (2003) argued that the construct of autonomy must be distinguished from independence and individualism (see also Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the framework of SDT, autonomy is the sense that one has willingly engaged in and fully endorses an act. Individuals may be dependent on others and still experience autonomy if they find value in that dependence and engage in it of their own volition. What is of importance is the *internalization* of the values that one is exercising. Thus, although Koreans viewed their culture as more collectivist and less individualist than Americans viewed their own culture, the internalization of *both* types of values predicted SWB in both countries, as well as in Russia and Turkey (Chirkov et al., 2003). Using a similar definition of autonomy, Sheldon et al. (2004) found that self-concordant individuals (i.e., those who pursued goals they perceived as freely chosen) tended to report higher levels of SWB in the U.S., South Korea, Taiwan, and China. Thus, autonomy as independence is not universal, whereas autonomy as feeling that one's behavior is freely chosen and not coerced may be universal.

These views are not contrary to the goal-as-moderator model advanced by Oishi (2000). This model posits that the relation between culture and SWB is moderated by personal goals. Culture may influence one's goals, but individuals do not always pursue culturally endorsed goals. For example, a Chinese student who values personal success may be happier studying alone than offering help to his fellow classmates, although the latter better reflects the cultural goal of interdependence. However, although attaining personal goals may bring emotional well-being, it may not always yield a sense of meaning in life. Ideally, personal goals that are aligned with cultural values lead to both happiness and meaning (Oishi, 2000). Thus, the role of personal goals is similar to the importance of internalization proposed by self-determination theory. Thus, although independence of others might not predict happiness equally across cultures, acting from one's volition is predicted by both self-determination and Oishi's theory to lead to happiness universally.

Both perspectives suggest that the distinction between personal and collective goals may often be blurred. For example, the SWB of Asians and Asian Americans is better predicted by satisfaction with goals involving family and friends than with goals concerned mainly with the self (Oishi & Diener, 2001; Radhakrishnan & Chan, 1997). However, among collectivist cultures, the goals of one's group may also be experienced as one's own (Markus & Kitayama, 1994), making them both collective and personal. In contrast, only personal goals were predictive of European American's SWB (Oishi & Diener, 2001; Radhakrishnan & Chan, 1997). Taken together, the findings suggest that there may be motives that correlate universally with well-being, and other motives or goals that are culture-specific correlates of well-being.

### ***Relationships with Others and SWB***

The above research implies that social relationships may influence SWB differently across cultures. For instance, although emotional experience is often considered private and internal, Kitayama and Markus (2000) suggested that the Japanese may experience good feelings *intersubjectively*, as features of an interpersonal situation that dissipate once the individual is out of that context. Consistent with this idea, Oishi, Diener, Scollon, and Biswas-Diener (2003) found that Japanese reported less pleasant affect when alone than did Americans. Further, although both groups experienced more pleasant affect when with friends than when alone, the effect was greater for the Japanese (as well as for Hispanic Americans; Oishi et al., 2003).

In general, East Asians may be more other-focused in their emotional experience than North Americans (Cohen & Gunz, 2002; Kitayama, Markus, & Kurokawa, 2000). Kitayama et al. (2000) compared how *engaged* (relationship focused) and *disengaged* (self focused) emotions relate to general good feelings (e.g., happiness) among Japanese and American participants. For Japanese, positive engaged emotions (e.g., friendly feelings) correlated more strongly with general good feelings than did positive disengaged emotions (e.g., pride). The reverse was true for American participants. However, a recent priming study by No and Hong (2004) suggests that the influence of culture on emotional experience is dynamic. Compared to baseline, Korean American biculturals who were primed with Korean cultural icons became more relational and less egocentric in their projection of emotions onto others. Similar effects may be observed in the experience of SWB. That is, what makes an individual happy may shift as the salience of cultural frames shifts, as when living in another culture for an extended period of time.

The relative importance of relationships across cultures also influences LS. Among Hong Kong Chinese, for example, relationship harmony was just as important as self-esteem in predicting LS (Kwan, Bond, & Singelis, 1997). In contrast, self-esteem was a stronger predictor of LS for Americans. Interestingly, relationship quality may have both, direct and indirect effects on LS. Kang et al. (2003) not only replicated Kwan et al.'s (1997) findings in the U.S., Korea, and mainland China, but they also showed that relationship quality was positively associated

with self-esteem in the latter two groups. Relationship quality was also predictive of Asian Americans' self-esteem, but *not* of European Americans' self-esteem (Kang et al., 2003).

A relationship of particular relevance to SWB is marriage. Across 42 societies, married people reported more pleasant and less unpleasant affect than the divorced (Diener, Gohm, Suh, & Oishi, 2000). However, small cultural effects were observed. Divorce seems to reduce pleasant affect to a lesser extent in collectivist than in individualist cultures. Gohm, Oishi, Darlington, and Diener (1998) also found that in collectivist cultures, the offspring of divorced parents reported greater LS than those whose parents remained in high-conflict marriages. These groups did not differ in individualist cultures. Both findings could be related to greater social support in collectivist cultures, which would help sustain well-being after divorce. Alternatively, the pressure to stay together may be greater in these societies so that couples divorce only after severe marital conflict. In this case, the decision to divorce might offer greater relief to spouses and their offspring. More research is needed to test these hypotheses.

### ***Income and SWB***

According to Veenhoven (1991), income contributes to SWB only insofar as it allows one to fulfill basic needs. Beyond the level needed to satisfy physical needs, income has less of an impact on SWB. Veenhoven's theory resembles Maslow's (1954), which posits that lower order needs (e.g., physical and security needs) must be gratified before higher order needs (i.e., belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization) become salient. However, some scholars have questioned whether the fulfillment of needs follows a linear hierarchy (Yang, 2003). Moreover, diminishing returns on the effects of material goods do not always imply that higher order needs have been prioritized. An implication drawn from both theories, however, is that income has a greater impact on SWB in poor societies because physical needs like having adequate food, water and housing are highly salient, and the effects of income on meeting these needs are direct. Indeed, researchers have found that financial satisfaction predicts LS more strongly in poorer than in wealthier countries (E. Diener & M. Diener, 1995; Oishi et al., 1999).

Although the relation between income and happiness is reduced among the wealthier nations, it is worth noting that income still contributes to SWB *beyond* the basic subsistence level (E. Diener, M. Diener, et al., 1995; E. Diener, Sandvik, Seidlitz, & M. Diener, 1993). Perhaps greater amounts of income facilitate the pursuit of other goals (e.g., relationships or philanthropy) that add to one's level of SWB, though little is known about *how* money is spent across cultures.

Although Maslow's needs hierarchy provides some understanding of the link between income and SWB, it is important to consider recent revisions of and critiques on the cross-cultural applicability of this model. Yang (2003) argued that Maslow's higher order needs (belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization) were

framed within an individualist context. He suggested that in collectivist societies, these needs are framed in ways that reaffirm social relationships and group identity. Moreover, he proposed (after Yu, 1992; cited in Yang, 2003) that bearing and rearing children be considered needs that were present in all societies because they ensured the transmission of genes to the next generation. Unlike the strictly hierarchical nature of Maslow's model, Yang suggested that needs can be experienced and fulfilled simultaneously. For example, raising children may fulfill both belongingness and esteem needs. Furthermore, individuals may emphasize or de-emphasize transmission needs throughout the life course. The relative importance of child rearing versus esteem needs might also differ across cultures, and the role that income plays in satisfying these needs could likewise vary.

## ***Conclusion***

A number of correlates of SWB are strikingly different across cultures, and yet some correlates appear to be universal. Variations in the cognitive and affective experience of happiness correspond with cultural differences in self-definition and the importance of social relationships. Income also contributes to SWB, though the relation is stronger among poorer than wealthier societies. Thus cultural psychological differences are not only rooted in values, but in the material world as well. However, because culture is dynamic, what makes people happy may change across generations, as well as within the individual as different aspects of a culture become salient. Nevertheless, there may be some universal correlates of SWB even in the face of cultural variations, such as autonomous internalization of cultural values.

## **Outcomes of SWB**

Research on SWB has traditionally been a search for the who, what, and how of happiness. That is, who is happy, what makes people happy, and how the various components of happiness relate to each other. Because happiness has historically been thought of as an end in itself, these were the first questions to be asked, and the field of SWB advanced greatly as these issues began to be studied more rigorously. However, the question of *why* happiness is important has only recently come under more serious attention.

Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener (2005) proposed that although success may produce happiness, it may also be the case that happiness leads to success. They reviewed several experimental and longitudinal studies suggesting that many outcomes of pleasant affect are desirable (e.g., prosocial behavior, self-esteem, likeability, creativity, and longevity). These characteristics, in turn, lead to success in many life domains such as marriage, work, and health. The framework developed by Lyubomirsky et al. is an intriguing area that requires much more research. Not only does the direction of causality await further clarification in some domains, but

the benefits and *costs* of pleasant affect must be investigated in a wider range of cultures.

The studies reviewed by Lyubomirsky et al. were conducted primarily in North America, Europe, and Australia. Whether or not pleasant affect is similarly beneficial in, for example, East Asia is certainly open for analyses. Would pleasant emotions produce similar outcomes in Japan where self-criticism and self-improvement are seen as important for success (Heine et al., 1999)? Heine et al. (2001) observed that North Americans were more likely to persist on a task after receiving success feedback, whereas Japanese were motivated to persist if they received failure feedback. The facilitative effect of pleasant affect among Westerners may be related to the general desirability of these emotions in their cultures (Eid & Diener, 2001). However, East Asian cultures do not devalue all pleasant emotions (e.g., Tsai et al., 2006). An important topic for future investigations is whether specific pleasant emotions are beneficial whereas others (e.g., pride; Eid & Diener, 2001; Scollon et al., 2004) are detrimental for success in certain cultures.

At a societal level, Inglehart and Klingemann (2000) suggested that rising levels of SWB might help legitimize and stabilize newly formed governments. They point out that major political changes in Belgium and the former U.S.S.R. in the early 1990s were *preceded* by decreasing levels of SWB. Furthermore, although many democratic societies had high levels of well-being, democracy did not predict SWB after controlling for GNP (Inglehart & Klingemann, 2000). Thus democratic institutions may increase SWB through rising wealth, but greater SWB might also help to sustain these institutions. These propositions are preliminary and more research is required to understand the causal process. Measuring national levels of SWB consistently and over a broad period of time could shed light on how fluctuations in well-being relate to sociopolitical developments.

## Methodological Issues

A critical question is whether measures of SWB are valid and reliable across cultures. Even within cultures, Schwarz and Strack (1999) pointed out several potential threats to the validity of self-reported SWB. They warned that self-reports are vulnerable to contextual factors (e.g., question wording and order effects) that can change the standards by which people evaluate their lives. However, Schimmack, Oishi and their colleagues (Schimmack, Diener, & Oishi, 2002; Oishi, Schimmack, & Colcombe, 2003) showed that the information that people use to make life satisfaction judgments is largely systematic and personally relevant. Thus, although self-reports of SWB may be open to momentary influences, more often than not, they convey meaningful information about an individual's evaluation of his or her life.

Nevertheless, there are additional challenges when SWB research is conducted across cultures. A basic issue is the adequate translation of written materials. Poor translations could alter the intended meaning of SWB measures, leading to spurious cultural differences. A number of studies, however, suggest that translation effects are unlikely to explain the substantial cultural differences that have been

observed. For example, bilingual Chinese reported lower life satisfaction than bilingual European Americans, whether they completed the SWLS in Chinese or in English (Shao, 1993). Similarly, M.L. Diener et al. (2004) gathered reports of emotional experience from multiple locations in China, Singapore, and India. Within the same country, some subsamples completed the survey in the local language, whereas others completed an English version. Results indicated that subsamples *within* a nation were more similar in emotional experience, regardless of the language that was used. Cultural differences obtained with translated measures of SWB have also been substantiated by *non*-self-report measures (Balatsky & Diener, 1993; Biswas-Diener et al., 2005). For instance, not only did Russians report lower SWB than Americans, they also recalled proportionately less positive events than did the latter (Balatsky & Diener, 1993).

Another issue is whether the use of numbers, or unfamiliarity with Likert scales could affect findings. In the slums of Calcutta, Biswas-Diener and Diener (2001) supplemented their seven-point Likert scales with a gradient of frowning and smiling faces. Some respondents were still confused by the task, forcing the researchers to reduce their measures to a three-point scale. Despite these initial difficulties, they obtained an alpha of 0.80 for the SWLS. Still, when conducting research in certain cultures, the novelty of psychological testing can result in lower reliabilities (e.g., Biswas-Diener et al., 2005). Moreover, the reliability of the SWLS was found to correlate positively with the GNP of a nation (Vittersø et al., 2002). Higher reliabilities do not completely account for the greater LS found in wealthier nations, but they do appear to influence results and may be due to greater familiarity with psychological testing in those countries. Nevertheless, measures of life satisfaction and happiness are predictive of social integration and elderly suicide rates across nations (Wu & Bond, 2006), providing some evidence that these measures are capturing important aspects of people's life experiences.

Different response styles have occasionally been proposed as an explanation for cultural differences in well-being, especially with regard to the lower SWB found among Asian samples. One hypothesis is that due to humility norms, Asian respondents tend toward neutrality by over-selecting responses at the midpoint of the scale. Diener, Suh, Smith, and Shao (1995) examined this possibility among Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and American samples, but did not find such a tendency. East Asians showed as much variation as Americans in their satisfaction with various domains. The former even reported a greater range of emotional intensity than the latter. Similarly, Veenhoven (2001) showed that negative response tendencies were unlikely to explain the lower levels of SWB among Russians. Interestingly, the lower scores on SWB run counter to the finding that acquiescence bias (the tendency to respond in agreement with items) tends to be higher in collectivistic nations (Johnson, Kulesa, Cho, & Shavitt, 2005; Smith, 2004). If acquiescence influenced responses on SWB measures, one would expect to see higher means in East Asia, but this is clearly not the case.

On the other hand, social desirability may underlie some differences in reported SWB. In cultures where LS and pleasant affect are considered desirable, there may be a tendency to project higher SWB. People in some cultures appear to have a

“positivity bias” in which satisfaction with global domains (e.g., education) are high even though satisfaction with more specific domains (e.g., textbooks, professors, and lectures) are *lower* on average (Diener, Scollon, Oishi, Dzokoto, & Suh, 2000). Diener et al. (2000) found that this positivity bias predicted LS beyond objective measures like income, and that it correlated positively with norms for LS. This finding may explain the discrepant relation between wealth and happiness in Japan and Latin America. Latin Americans exhibited high desirability for LS, as well as a strong positivity bias. In contrast, Japan and other East Asians reported lower desirability for LS and a corresponding *negativity* bias, such that global satisfaction was lower than would be expected from specific domain satisfactions (Diener et al., 2000). These biases could be considered artifacts, but they may also represent interesting cultural phenomena in and of themselves. Furthermore, it is worth reiterating that cultural differences in satisfaction judgments and emotional experience have been observed using other methodologies. For instance, a one-week daily diary study showed that European Americans’ global past-week satisfaction was more positive than their average satisfaction for *each day* of that week (Oishi, 2002). In contrast, Asian American participants did not exhibit a significant bias in global versus daily satisfaction ratings. Similarly, Kim-Prieto (2005) found that European-Americans and Asians were similar in happiness reported “now,” but that Asians reporting feeling less during the past year and “in general.” Finally, the recall of *pleasant* but not unpleasant emotions during a vacation predicted the desire of European Americans to repeat the trip, whereas for Asian Americans the reverse was true (Wirtz, 2004). Interestingly, experience-sampling data revealed that the two groups did not differ in their *online* experience of pleasant and unpleasant emotions. Thus, the global judgment and not the specific reports influenced participants’ decisions. Instead of dismissing global judgments altogether, Diener et al. (2000) suggested that global and domain-specific judgments are both distinctly informative aspects of SWB. Nevertheless, cross-cultural researchers should continue to use multiple methods (e.g., memory measures, informant reports, etc.), whenever possible.

Perhaps a fundamental concern is whether it is appropriate to use nations as a proxy for studying culture. Researchers often define groups by their countries of origin and attribute any differences among these groups to culture. However, culture is not necessarily confined to geopolitical boundaries (Hermans & Kempen, 1998; Hong & Chiu, 2001). By equating entire nations with single cultures, we risk overlooking important differences within nations, as well as similarities that extend beyond national borders. In the case of emotion norms, many different norm patterns for pleasant and unpleasant affect may co-exist within a nation (Eid & Diener, 2001). At the same time, however, nations within a certain *region* (e.g., East Asia or Latin America) appear to have similar patterns of emotional experience (M.L. Diener et al., 2004).

It is not entirely meaningless to group samples by nation. People living within a country are likely to have shared experiences and common histories, which are crucial in the formation of a common culture. Still, cultural entities may be defined at different levels, in any number of ways. It is important to realize the tradeoffs inherent at a given level of analysis. Speaking of “regional cultures” allows us to make

generalizations, but at the sacrifice of specificity. A focus on subcultural grouping may provide rich, nuanced data, but at the cost of generalizability. A further point is that culture is dynamic. The penetration of Western media and popular culture into other parts of the world can stimulate cultural change, leading to generational differences within nations. Thus, different age groups within a nation might differ in their attitudes and experience of SWB. More longitudinal research is needed to disentangle cohort effects from developmental effects.

Finally, group differences in SWB might be related to socioeconomic status (SES), not just cultural beliefs and values per se. Income and education levels can determine the quality of life for people in a society, which in turn could lower or raise SWB. However, SES may sometimes be confounded with cultural groupings, especially when a history of discrimination has prevented certain groups from attaining higher status (Betancourt & López, 1993). Apart from discrimination, people from high versus low SES groups may face different realities and prioritize different values and beliefs (e.g., Snibbe & Markus, 2005). In either case, controlling for SES would result in a removal of cultural effects as well. Thus, separating SES from culture may not always be a straightforward task. On the other hand, cultural effects that persist even after controlling for socioeconomic variables pose interesting questions for future research and theory (see Rice & Steele, 2004) concerning the nature of culture and how it should be operationalized.

## Future Directions

Although cultural variations in SWB have been replicated across self-report and memory measures, an important agenda for future research is to determine the extent to which these differences are reflected in the actual experience of well-being. More frequent applications of the experience sampling method across cultures will provide further clarification of such differences. In one of the few such studies, Scollon et al. (2004) found that cultural differences in reports of past emotional experience do have some basis in on-line experience, but they also reflect aspects of the self-concept that independently influence the recall of emotions. These findings are provocative, but must be replicated across more cultures. Other methods of assessing SWB, such as Kim's (2004) implicit association measure of life satisfaction, have only recently been developed and could provide further insights. Also critical will be the further development and integration of biological markers of well-being. For example, a predisposition toward positive affectivity has been linked to individual differences in chronic left brain activation (Ito & Cacioppo, 1999). The immune system and neurotransmitter systems (e.g., serotonin and dopamine) may also play a role in well-being. These and other types of measures will help us know whether differences in SWB lie in actual experience or in self-reports.

There is also a continuing need for theory on the functioning of SWB in culture—how it is defined in each culture, how it supports culture, and the types of outcomes associated with SWB in various societies. SWB is an important criterion for evaluating the success of a society, but by itself is insufficient. To just be happy in the

face of starvation or inequality would seem preposterous to most people. Happiness and cultural conceptions of the good life are often tied to the sociomoral fabric of a society. As Markus and Kitayama (1994) suggested, being a competent member of one's culture typically "feels good" or "right." Thus, in some ways, LS may involve an implicit moral judgment on one's life, or on oneself as a person. Future studies of indigenous concepts of well-being, as well as the relation of SWB to the moral structures of a society will help researchers to further contextualize their interpretations of SWB.

Finally, viewing culture dynamically will enhance our understanding of cultural variation in SWB. Dynamic constructionists (e.g., Hong & Chiu, 2001) suggest that the influence of culture is not rigid and sweeping, but that it can fluctuate with the social context. Particularly among immigrants and other individuals who have been exposed to multiple cultures, *which* culture is influential may depend on cues in the environment (e.g., at home versus at school) that activate different sets of cultural knowledge. An intriguing issue is how such cultural frame-switching might mediate or moderate the relation between LS and correlates such as self-esteem. How bicultural individuals feel about and integrate their cultural identities (Haritatos & Benet-Martínez, 2002; Kim, B.R. Sarason, & I.G. Sarason, 2006) might also influence their well-being as they navigate between different cultural contexts. A related topic is how the causes of SWB change across the life span, or across different cohorts within the same culture. Thus, dynamic cultural perspectives contribute to a more fluid notion of SWB, raising new questions about the structure of well-being and its outcomes.

## Conclusions

We have learned that comparisons of well-being are possible for some variables, and that there are probably some universal causes of well-being and ill-being. At the same time, we have learned that there are fascinating differences between cultures in the patterning and content of SWB variables, as well as in the causes and correlates of SWB. These differences should guide us in our attempts to make valid comparisons. For instance, some emotions may be understood similarly across cultures, whereas others have different connotative meanings. Direct comparisons, then, should be made with the former and not the latter. Even where SWB components are different, cultures could be compared according to their own criteria by measuring the attainment of culturally valued goals and experiences. Such an approach to well-being still allows success to be assessed in different cultural contexts.

The effect size of culture can vary depending on the specific component of SWB under study. Cultures perhaps vary more in frequency and perceived norms for pleasant emotions than for unpleasant emotions (Eid & Diener, 2001; Scollon et al., 2004). In the case of unpleasant emotions, there is a stronger trend toward much larger differences within than between cultures. The uneven effects of culture on

SWB not only resonate with dynamic views of culture, but they also call for circumspection in the type of inferences we draw from societal levels of SWB.

Much has been learned in the past decade of research in culture and SWB. Researchers began by making simple comparisons of nations on life satisfaction and happiness. Next they began to ask questions about the validity of measures across cultures, and about the causes and correlates of SWB in different societies. The field continues to advance with more sharply focused research questions concerning *when* cultural influences come into play, *which* aspects of well-being are affected, and *what* the outcomes of SWB are across cultures. We are also entering an era in which research will treat culture as more dynamic, and individuals as bearers of more than one cultural tradition. These issues will continue to require multimeasure strategies, and hopefully stimulate the development of new methodologies. In this regard, progress in the various areas of cultural psychology and SWB, as well as more interdisciplinary work with the other social and biological sciences will benefit both perspectives greatly.

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